

## **Women as Victims and Actors: Special Reference to Manipur**

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**Abstract:** Armed conflict has affected both women and men directly and indirectly but their experiences are different. Mostly men are targeted as direct victims whereas women are often left with social-economic impact and psychological trauma. Most of these women are from the below poverty line with less educational background. The paper is trying to highlight the plights of women affected by armed conflict and their lives which are often ignored and neglected. It tries to bring to light on the hardships they are experiencing for their own survival and their families with minimal support from the society and the system. There are situations during an armed conflict which push women to take up decision making roles and are often required to sit on the negotiating table with conflicting agents in the public sphere. These kinds of circumstances can change the life of a woman completely. They sometimes evolved themselves into becoming active peace activists or they start participating in the militarist struggles as combatants. The paper also tries to emphasize the role of women organisations and NGOs in the armed conflict situation and the supports provided by them to the affected families. Armed conflict not only brings miseries, destitutions, and violations to the lives of women but also gives opportunities to transform their lives in terms of self determinations, empowerment, their outlook and perception on social issues as well as their social relationships and status.

**Keywords:** Armed conflict, Women, Combatants, Poverty, Decision making.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Form the early stage armed conflict have been an integral part of human civilization, witness by various countries, violating various International humanitarian and human rights laws. No doubt there is decline in wars between countries, but there is a remarkable increase in the number of violent internal wars claiming millions of lives, displacing equal number of people from their homes and native places. Most of the countries, in the present world, are under the menace of conflict situations. They are confronted with political, social, economic, religious, or ethnic conflicts, and many a times these conflicts become more violent with the use of sophisticated weaponry. Such armed conflicts lead to gross and systematic violation of basic human rights of civilian population in general and often altered the gender roles during and after an armed conflict. Armed conflict from the early time, traditionally regarded as an exclusively male activities and women are often seen as merely a passive victims of the conflict. Both man and women suffer multiple forms of violence during the war but sexual and gender-based violence have become defining characteristics of modern warfare, and women, often seen as the vessels of cultural identity, are increasingly considered legitimate around identity politics [1]. Women face the most devastating experience of gender based violence both during armed conflict and in the

post conflict period. Armed conflict kills, injures and harms the people, developing a various physical and psychological disordered. Although, men are affected directly and participate openly in the conflict and yet armed conflict affects women and children extensively in a different way. Moreover, the roles of gender and their relations are often found to be altered during and after an armed conflict. These gender roles not only determined how women and men are expected to act in the times of peace, but also guide their actions in the times of armed conflicts.

### **Understanding of Internal armed conflict**

Base on common article 3 of the 1949 Geneva conventions and article 1 of the Additional protocol II, the ICRC define internal armed conflicts as protracted armed confrontations occurring between governmental armed forces and the forces of one or more armed groups, or between such groups arising on the territory of a State [party to the Geneva Conventions]. The armed confrontation must reach a minimum level of intensity and the parties involved in the conflict must show a minimum of organisation" [2].

Internal armed conflict is also defined as "conflict that is confined to the territory of a single state wherein the intensity of violence exceeds levels normally associated with riots and isolated and sporadic

acts involving the use of armed force. Internal armed conflict is conflict at the lower end of spectrum. In a sense, it's a conflict 'of the people, by the people, for the people'. It pits the instruments of the states against groups seemingly representing sections of the people of the state. Rubert Smith refers to it as "war amongst the people". It is an irregular, non-conventional, civil form of conflict. The cause of conflict, as indeed its solutions, invariably lie in the political, social and economic domain, i.e., outside the realm of the military. The people are the objective of the campaign. Political action is dominant and the use of force is restricted" [3].

With these solid definition it can say that India is going through a severe internal armed conflict after independence. Conflict in Jammu and Kashmir, in the North-eastern States and in Central and Eastern India where Maoist rebels operate are three major areas where armed conflict is seen. A large number of armed groups and insurgents have been fighting either for independence or integrating into Pakistan. In northeast India, many insurgents or armed groups are fighting against Indian forces to take over the reins of power or to obtain greater autonomies with the state or in order to secede and create their own state. From the time of its Independence and rise of insurgency in the states, a large number of people have been killed and gross human rights violation can be seen. According to South Asia Terrorism Portal, the total Number of India Fatalities from 1994 to 9<sup>th</sup> October 2016 is found to be 65390, in which 24805 civilians, 9836 Security Force Personnels and 30749 are terrorists. In the State of Manipur alone, 6068 people have been killed in insurgency related fatalities since 1992 till 9<sup>th</sup> October 2016 according to South Asia Terrorism Portal. Despite of these alarming numbers of death and fighting against the armed groups and armed forces Indian Government refuse to admit the existence of internal armed conflict in India. Rather the Indian government says that there is no armed conflict in India as a whole. Government of India consider the situation as a "Law and Order Problem".

#### **A brief history of Manipur**

Manipur is a small state in the North Eastern part of India Located at the extreme corner of the country bordering with Burma in east, Mizoram in south, Assam in the West and Nagaland in the north. The geographical structure of the state is surrounded by nine hills covering an area of 22,327 square miles. There are nine districts in the state, namely, Imphal East, Imphal West, Churachanpur, Ukhul, Thoubal, Tamenglong, Chandel, Bishnupur and Senapati. And the population is about 27, 21,756 according to the

2011 census, among them male and female are 1,438,586 and 1,417,208 respectively [4]. Manipur is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious state with about 36 ethnic groups. The Meitei being considered as the major ethnic group and inhabit the valley along with other ethnic peoples and ethnic groups like Naga and Kuki settles in the hill areas of the Manipur.

2000 years, before, Manipur were Independent kingdom but it merged with Union of India in 1949 two years after British colonial rule ended on the subcontinent. Since then, the state has been witnessing low intensity conflict. Today around 30 armed groups operate in Manipur and "dozens of battalions of the Indian army and several units of Indian paramilitary forces are stationed in Manipur to give an idea of the level of militarisation in Manipur, the police have over 60,000 officers, of which 55,000 are assigned security tasks (military and paramilitary police) and the rest with civil matters" [5].

Today, Manipur is one of the most armed conflict affected state in India. Ethnic conflict, atrocity, gun killing, tensions, counter Insurgencies, conflicts among armed groups are the observable fact which lies in Manipur. To suppress the various movements for Independence by several groups of insurgents of Manipur, the government of India imposed the law Armed Forces Special Power Act, 1958. The army use curfews, crackdowns, search operations, arrest, torture, custodial killing, disappearances of youth, firing, shelling, and rape, locals as human shields and genocide as weapons to suppress the insurgency.

#### **Women as victims**

According to the Table below, 2261 civilian have been killed from 1992 till 9 October, 2016, security force personnel are 1014 and 2793 terrorist/militants in total 6068 people have been killed in this 15 years. According to an unofficial sources, at least 20,000 people are said to have died due to violence since the conflict began in the 1950s but not much that happens there makes the national news— unless it is a particularly brutal attack by militants [6]. So far the victims who have been killed in the armed conflicts in the state actor custody after torture are the young boys and newly married men aged from 16 to 35. The point is, direct effects of the combat and military operations are likely to affect men more because most soldiers in most armies and combats are male giving their women the name tag of young widows and fatherless children and also mother who lose their son.

**Table 1: Insurgency related killings 1992-2016**

Years	Civilians	Security Force Personnel	Terrorists	Total
1992	84	30	51	165
1993	266	91	66	423
1994	189	98	63	350
1995	183	64	74	321
1996	117	65	93	275
1997	233	111	151	495
1998	87	62	95	244
1999	89	64	78	231
2000	93	51	102	246
2001	70	25	161	256
2002	36	53	101	190
2003	27	23	148	198
2004	40	41	127	208
2005	138	50	143	331
2006	107	37	141	285
2007	150	40	218	408
2008	131	13	341	485
2009	77	18	321	416
2010	26	8	104	138
2011	25	10	30	65
2012	25	12	73	110
2013	21	6	28	55
2014	20	10	24	54
2015	17	24	53	94
2016	10	8	7	25
Total*	2261	1014	2793	6068

\*Data till October 9, 2016

Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal

Loss of male labour has intensified the pressures on women seeking to rebuild lost assets and maintain incomes. Women, as heads of households have to not only tend to their children but also find employment and income in highly insecure environments. They lose property and means of livelihood is displaced, on the one hand and on the other they have to bear the burden of managing and protecting their families and communities. As a result they have to undergo physical and mental trauma. They further become subject to the increasing patriarchal control over their lives and liberty.

“The more civilian are directly killed by military operations, the more women will be directly killed as well” [7]. When men are killed women are rape, sexually abuse and harassed. In 2006, in the middle of January at Tipaimuk area alleged mass rape was proceeded by underground cadres and in 2005 Naobi Devi a girlfriend of Vikas Singh (PLA Cadre) was gang rape by police forces for the killing of one Lokhon Singh, a Police Cammando and the rape of Manorama Devi by Indian army, in 2004, where her body was found in the paddy field. Like this, many women and girls are raped and harassed however, most of the rapes in Manipur through the security agencies went unnoticed because the victim used to face intimidation and social stigma associated with rape. Ch. Jamini Devi- former Chairperson of Manipur State

Commission for Women gives a statement that “Crime against women is a serious violation of women’s right, and it continues unabated, despite much legislation” [8].

Most of these women affected by the armed conflict are found to be from the rural area. They are found to be less educated or illiterate which make them more marginalised and vulnerable in the society especially during the armed conflicts situation. These women have suffered from various atrocities and bound by the traditional patriarchal norms. Here domestic violence and suicide tendency are very commonly found in those women who have suffered from both direct and indirect consequences of the armed conflict. However, with the help of some women organisations and civil societies, armed conflict affected women have gain the awareness and are able to regain some dignity in the society. They get strength and power to fight for their rights and justice and against the atrocities bought by the armed conflict to them.

**Women Changing Roles due to Armed Conflicts:**

During the armed conflict and after the armed conflict situation, majority of the women who have affected directly or indirectly by the armed conflict generally become more visible within the family and community as men are absent for long period of time or killed. Many women headed household have rises and

because of that reason many women become bread earners and primary decision making in the home and in the community. They came out from the traditional patriarchal norms and altered the gender role and about the participation of women in decision making capacities in their households, civil society and the formal economy. They further challenge the roles and actively became an agent of the peace building and raise their voice against the human rights violation during the armed conflict situation. Women in Manipur have been participants in public affairs right from the early days. They actively take part in matters related to peace and security of the state. It is women of Manipur who make the repeal of Armed Force Special power Act from certain area. The participation of women of Manipur in the Public affair was linked to the establishment of women's markets; the first instance of women's awakening in Manipur was the Nupilal (Women's agitation) of 1904 and in 1939 against rising prices and unavailability of rice. Here women suffer physical torture and imprisonment at the hands of the British for defying the orders of the government to export rice. The various women groups take various initiatives to bring peace in rich culture state Manipur.

Many women who are victims or active agents or mother of the state mostly engage in peace activism and play a critical role in mediation and conflict resolution in the armed conflict situations to protect human rights violations and to protect their sons and daughters from the armed conflict. It can be noted here that, the former United Nations secretary General Kofi Annan, in his statement, he argues that women's interest in peace process often stems from their experiences of armed conflict, whether as victims or as armed participants [9].

Many women organisations have been set up to bring peace in the state and to protect the upcoming generation from the armed conflict situation which has been witnessing for many decades. Manipur Women gun Survival network 's direct attention evolves a gender sensitive approach to the gun crisis, supports women economically and bring them forward to play a crucial role in small arms policy. It is the 1<sup>st</sup> initiative of its kind in India. Some other organisation that helps women and women affected by the armed conflicts are Extrajudicial Execution Victims Families' Association Manipur (EEVFAM) which was establish by widows of the gun survivors to build solidarity amongst the victims' families and to seek justice by using all the legal procedures and legitimate means in connection to the extra-judicial killing. Women and Development (WAD) gives awareness to the gun survivors widows, provided legal helps, gives skill training and supports economically to develop themselves, IRDSO (Integrated Rural Development Service organisation) is also one of the women organisation that helped for the

widows of guns survivors. Others Non-governmental conflicts are HRI (Human Rights Initiatives), CSD-RTC (Centre for Social Development Rehabilitation training Centre), UNM-M (United NGOs Mission-Manipur), CSD (Centre for Social Development), EEMA (Environment and Economic Management Association), WIGC (Women Income Generation Centre), RSA (Rural Service Agency), YWO (Young Women Organisation) etc. They all gave strength to the women who are directly or indirectly affected by the armed conflicts and make them aware of the armed conflicts and its consequences.

The Naga Mother association (NMA) is the one of the best well known women's organization in North East India which is working in peace issues. The kuki civil societies like the kuki Mother's Association have done a yeoman's Service (exceptionally good, useful, or loyal service or assistance) to remove the sense of violence and conflict between the insurgents and public.

The Meira Paibi (Torch bearers) struggle has been acknowledged as a unique Human Rights activity throughout the world. The fight against the violation of Human rights by the Indian security Forces and Manipuri Police, the Climax of which was the agitation against the rape and murder of Th. Manorama against the misuse of AFSPA by the Assam Rifles inspired thousands of human rights activities throughout the nation. And also the agitation against killing of the Rabina Devi, a four month pregnant women in the crowded Market by police force and Chongtham Sanjit Singh, a former insurgents and making many people injured in the fake counter.

The hungers strike of Irom Sharmila Devi since November 4, 2000 was the greatest symbol of people's fight for civil liberty and dignity of man. She started fasting after gunning down of ten civilians waiting at a bus stand in Malom near Imphal by the security forces. Then she resolved to fast until the AFSPA is repealed. But recently she dropped or breaks her 16 years long hunger strike on 9<sup>th</sup> August 2016. She ended her fast exactly a month after the Supreme Court judgment questioned the immunity enjoyed by the security personnel under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 (AFSPA) against criminal action for acts committed in disturbed areas. The apex court had said that there was no concept of "absolute immunity" from trial by a criminal court if an Army man had committed an offence [10].

Another significant role that women in Manipur play in the armed conflict is becoming an active agents/ insurgents and direct participants in the armed conflict. Main reason of entering in the insurgent groups are found to be of losing their near and dear one

like beloved, husband, children and families and avenge them. Another is because of poverty and also forcedly recruitment of small boys and girls and giving training to carry out all the activities of insurgents. During the year 2008, small children between the ages of 10 to 16 went missing from various part of the Manipur due to recruitment of teenage kids into several armed groups. They perform most of the messenger work and labour work. Sometimes they even take violent role such as girls' soldiers and female suicide bomber. According to the War child organisation of United Kingdom reveals that there are an estimated 250,000 child soldiers in the world today and about 40% of all child soldiers are girls. They are often used as non-combatant 'wives' (sex slaves) of the male combatants [11]. The third reason is because of the gender discrimination and gender inequality in the patriarchal society which makes them passive and restricted from their freedom of being a human being. One of the active women member of the KCP-MC ( Kangleipak communist Party) mentions that she feel free and empowered after being a member in the armed groups and free from the patriarchal norms. Further she added that participating as a combatant in armed conflict challenged both the gender stereotyping and empowers women.

Manipuri women who have entered into the insurgents groups are mostly found to be from the poor family background and from rural areas. They mostly joined the groups to earn some incomes and to able to supports their family as no other way are seen for easy money. These women groups are mostly performed supporting roles for their organisation and follow the orders of their leaders. They are mostly engaged in extortion of money from the civilians and government officers and even they performed act like abduction of children and officers. However, these does not mean that women who have entered to armed groups only for money rather some women are very actively working sincerely in pursuit of their objectives and follow their philosophy. Women who have participated in the armed groups feel that they are free from the patriarchal norms and are empowered. But these women participation as combatants in the number of revolutionary organisations could not able to reached higher level of leadership and if so the numbers are limited.

## CONCLUSION

The overall scenario of the Manipuri Women is the same. They suffer right abuses only because of their gender and increase more in the time of armed conflicts. Their social- economic life and their rights in the society need to be discussed and make them aware of their rights. Women group in Manipur have developed many powerful programmes and taken up various valuable initiatives to confront the armed violence of both insurgents and the police/security forces. However, most of their action remains in protest

form and after initial action they became invisible. It is now time to wake up women of the Manipur, not only Manipur but also the whole of the North East women to know and understand the issues and effects of War, Conflict and Peace. Women in the north East State need to understand the political economy of violence, the militarization of the north east society. Beside this, it is important to understand the international known United Nations resolutions on women and peace building which remains just on paper such as United Nation Security Council Resolution 1325 and 1820. Women need to know each and every thing to bring peace in the beautiful states of North East India.

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